



## Cronfa - Swansea University Open Access Repository

---

This is an author produced version of a paper published in:

*The persistence of critical theory: Volume 8 of culture and civilization*

Cronfa URL for this paper:

<http://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa48302>

---

### Book chapter :

McQueen, P. (2017). *The promise and problem of recognition theory*. The persistence of critical theory: Volume 8 of culture and civilization, Routledge.

---

This item is brought to you by Swansea University. Any person downloading material is agreeing to abide by the terms of the repository licence. Copies of full text items may be used or reproduced in any format or medium, without prior permission for personal research or study, educational or non-commercial purposes only. The copyright for any work remains with the original author unless otherwise specified. The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder.

Permission for multiple reproductions should be obtained from the original author.

Authors are personally responsible for adhering to copyright and publisher restrictions when uploading content to the repository.

<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/library/researchsupport/ris-support/>

# The Promise and Problem of Recognition Theory

## Introduction

The concept of recognition is becoming an increasingly important component within contemporary critical theory. Fuelled by the work of Axel Honneth, recognition theory offers a powerful means for diagnosing social problems, understanding and justifying social struggles, and identifying the direction of societal change. It also contributes to an important rethinking of the self, identity and social relationships by initiating a shift from an atomistic to an intersubjective model of the subject. However, despite the evident promise of recognition theory, there are important problems to be addressed. In particular, a number of theorists have highlighted the ways in which recognition is intertwined with the issues of power and social regulation. This can be seen in the struggles for and against recognition experienced by many individuals in virtue of their gender identity. In particular, trans politics highlights the complex, ambivalent nature of recognition. Contrary to the arguments of some theorists, rather than rejecting recognition theory it is necessary to retain the valuable, positive insights it offers whilst remaining attentive to the dangers that attach to acts of recognition. This calls for an appreciation of the complex nature and ambivalent effects of recognition. It also suggests the need to explore ways of reducing the salience of recognition in social life, at least with regard to gender identity.

## (I) The Emergence of Recognition Theory

The roots of modern recognition theory lie in the work of Hegel (1977; 1991), who in turn develops aspects of Fichte's (2000) philosophy of right and freedom. One of Hegel's key insights – outlined in his oft-discussed “master-slave dialectic” (Hegel, 1997: 111ff.) – is that the development of self-consciousness requires recognition from other conscious beings (Hegel, *ibid*: 46ff.). In particular, the experience of oneself as a free, self-determining agent can occur only if one is recognised as such by other beings whom one in turn recognises as free.<sup>1</sup> The result is that we must mutually recognise one another as free, thus highlighting the importance of *equal* social relationships (rather than the unequal social relationships

constitutive of, say, slavery). The general point to extract from this is that certain key aspects of the self can only develop and be sustained if individuals are recognised in appropriate ways by other social beings. We are thus dependent upon receiving recognition from others if we are to understand and value who we are. This marks an important shift from the atomistic self, in which the individual is considered to be a self-contained, independent entity, to an intersubjective model of the self, which stresses the deep imbrications and interdependencies between the self and others.

Although the idea of recognition and its connection to the self was developed by a number of philosophers working in traditions heavily influenced by Hegel, most notably existentialism, Marxism and phenomenology, it was not until the work of Charles Taylor that a specifically *political* theory of recognition was developed. Taylor's classic essay, entitled "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition" (Taylor, 1994), set the tone for debates about identity and recognition within normative political theory and it is still taken as a major reference point for discussions of recognition politics. According to Taylor the importance of recognition lies in its relationship with identity. Specifically, recognition is essential to the positive construction of a socio-cultural identity. Consequently, insofar as one's identity is central to who one is and the kind of life that one leads, recognition is rendered a 'vital human need' (ibid: 26). The value of recognition can be appreciated by considering both its absence (non-recognition) and negative / demeaning forms of recognition (misrecognition). To quote Taylor (ibid), 'Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being'. Indeed, misrecognition 'can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred' (ibid).

It is precisely our sensitivity to recognition that underpins its importance: we are social creatures that are reliant upon the recognition of others for making sense of ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Fundamental aspects of our self are shaped by how we are recognised and thus, the story goes, a positive relation-to-self is only possible if we are able to enjoy appropriate relations of recognition, especially with those who matter to us (people who Taylor refers to as "significant others"). According to Taylor this key insight explains the emergence, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century, of "identity politics", in which central aspects of a person's self – their race, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, etc. – were rendered the basis of, and justification for, social struggles that defined much feminist, racial and cultural politics. Having one's race, gender or sexuality actively demeaned through degrading social practices

constitutes a specific social injustice, one that can be overlooked within purely distributive theories of justice. A good society, for Taylor, is thus one in which its members are able to enjoy positive recognition of their shared, cultural identity.

## **(II) Axel Honneth and the Promise of Recognition**

Despite the significant influence of Taylor's essay within political theory, he does not offer a comprehensive model of recognition politics. His larger concern was with developing a politics of multiculturalism, and the concept of recognition was a useful tool for him in achieving this aim. It would seem fair to say that Taylor ignited a general interest in the idea of recognition amongst political theorists, without providing a detailed account of the role that recognition should play within a theory of justice. It was left to Axel Honneth, one of the leading critical theorists of his generation, to develop the idea of recognition into a full-blown critical theory of society, which he has done in admirable detail and to great success (e.g. Honneth 1995; 2003; 2007; 2012). Strongly influenced by both first and second generation critical theorists, Honneth has produced a critical social theory that focuses on the phenomenology of social suffering in order to explore experiences of disrespect (i.e. misrecognition) as revealing occurrences of injustice. Such experiences, grounded in normative expectations for appropriate recognition, can function as both the explanation and justification for collective socio-political struggles.<sup>3</sup>

Although his theory diverges from Taylor's model in important ways, Honneth nevertheless agrees that there is a fundamental connection between recognition and our sense of self. Following Hegel (1991) and Mead (1934), he delves deeper into the mechanics of recognition and selfhood to identify three "spheres" or "patterns" of recognition that relate to three dimensions of the self that must all be cultivated if we are to become autonomous, individualised moral agents. These three spheres of recognition are love, respect and esteem, which collectively constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful self-realisation:

For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem... that a person can come to see himself or herself,

unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires. (Honneth, 1995: 169)

Honneth's idea of autonomy is thus tied to a psychological account of personal development in which we progress through each stage of recognition, developing sufficient self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem to take ourselves as fully individualised, moral and self-determining subjects. This allows Honneth to conceive of society as a recognition order structured around institutionalising the appropriate relations of recognition conducive to the self-realisation of all members of that society. As a result, societal change – indeed, social *progress* – can be assessed as a developmental process driven by the moral claims arising from experiences of disrespect, with the normative direction of that change being determined by the extent to which it fosters the conditions for successful self-realisation. Challenging the tendency to approach questions of justice through a primarily redistributive framework, Honneth has suggested that we would do better to conceive of justice in terms of institutionalised processes of recognition: 'The justice or wellbeing of a society is measured according to the degree of its ability to secure conditions of mutual recognition in which personal identity formation, and hence individual self-realization, can proceed sufficiently well' (Honneth, 2004: 354). This means that a more just society is one that has secured more opportunities for positive recognition for all of its members.

Underlying Honneth's theory is the assumption that humans have an inherent need and desire for recognition, which he refers to as the 'quasi-transcendental interests' of the human race (Honneth, 2003: 174). If our need and desire for recognition go unmet, then we often experience emotional states such as frustration or anger. According to Honneth, such states can disclose to us that we are subject to a social injustice, specifically that we are being denied due recognition: 'subjects perceive institutional procedures as social injustice when they see aspects of their personality being disrespected to which they believe they have a right to recognition' (Honneth, 2003: 132). This reveals Honneth's insistence that critical social theory must address the concrete social realities experienced by individuals, rather than purely abstract conceptions of justice and morality.<sup>4</sup> Of particular importance are subjective experiences of disrespect and the accompanying negative emotions such as anger, frustration, shame and resentment (Honneth, 2007). Importantly, Honneth is keen to stress that such experiences do not inevitably give rise to organised political action; rather, they provide the potential for identifying injustice and initiating social struggles. These can evolve into collective, political struggles if we find

that our peers share similar experiences and we are able to place such experiences within an emancipatory political discourse. Thus, it is important to empower individuals by providing them with the means through which to understand and articulate their negative social experiences.

In his recent work, Honneth (2014) has shifted somewhat from grounding his model in philosophical anthropology and object-relations theory, which focused on the recognition needs of individual subjects and their successful self-realisation, to a more socio-historical perspective that examines societal development through the concept of freedom. Specifically, he argues that we can understand changes within society as oriented toward realising the norms of freedom immanent within existing social institutions and practices. These changes are seen to be progressive because they represent the move toward a more just society. The reason for this is that ‘which is “just” is that which protects, fosters or realizes the autonomy of all members of society’ (ibid: 18). What unites this analysis with his earlier works is that Honneth, following Hegel, conceptualises freedom and autonomy in terms of mutual recognition: to be free is to be autonomous, which in turn is to stand in appropriate social relations of mutual recognition. Consistent with his earlier work, Honneth continues to see social change as both driven and justified by the expanded opportunities for mutual recognition granted to all members of a given society.

The accounts offered by Taylor and Honneth each highlight the valuable contribution that recognition theory can make to discussions about identity, freedom, autonomy and justice. Both theorists would agree that a just society, at least in part, is one in which individuals are able to enjoy due and appropriate recognition (although they disagree over just what “due and appropriate” recognition consists in). This derives from the fact that they each see recognition as an essential component of the good life (McBride, 2013: 120). Furthermore, they agree that the solution for many social ills consists in instantiating better relations of recognition. This means that recognition is seen as the *solution* to such problems. Of course, relations of recognition can be problematic, such as when women are recognised as inherently inferior to men. However, both Taylor and Honneth suggest that such issues can be ironed out by improving the recognition relation in question, such as when women are recognised as the political and social equal to men. Consequently, a guiding idea underlying their respective positions is that society should focus on resolving political struggles through offering more or better forms of recognition to those currently subject to misrecognition or non-recognition,

whether this be focused at the level of collective, cultural identity or the recognition relations essential to individual self-realisation and autonomous moral agency.

### **(III) The Problem of Recognition: Power, Identity and the Self**

Despite the evident promise of recognition theory for understanding justice and social struggles, a number of theorists have argued that Honneth and Taylor both offer inadequate accounts of power that limits the effectiveness of their respective models (McNay, 2008; 2014; McQueen, 2015a; 2015b; Petherbridge, 2013; cf. van den Brink and Owen, 2007). In particular, it is claimed that they fail to consider the ways in which subject-formation is shaped by power and hence overlook how relations of recognition, which underpin subject-formation, are bound up with relations of power. This critique owes much to the work of Michel Foucault, who meticulously documented the ways in which modern forms of subjectivity have been shaped by practices of power embedded in social discourses, institutions and norms (e.g. Foucault, 1978; 1980; 1995). Foucault's analyses of disciplinary power show how discourses and institutions intertwine to shape the forms of identity and self-relation available to social subjects. Thus, for example, the concepts of reason, normality and health all enforce particular patterns of thought and behaviour that reflect socially contingent, rather than objective and natural, conceptions of the human. Furthermore, changes in modern society have allowed ever more extensive and invasive forms of observation and regulation, with the result that individuals are subject to increasingly subtle yet coercive social and institutional pressures.

These pressures often centre upon the individual's self, so that they become enacted by people at the level of identity and, crucially, are often taken to be expressive of – rather than constitutive of – their (natural) self. For example, accounts of sexuality and gender, which are often underpinned by psychological and biological discourses that are seen to represent objective reality, often revolve around notions of “normal” sexual and gendered behaviours (such as monogamous, heterosexual sexual activity between a feminine woman and a masculine man). These, in turn, are seen to express “healthy” and “natural” forms of human activity which, crucially, cast alternative forms of sexual desire or gender identity as “unnatural” and hence “unhealthy” (such as forms of sado-masochism or particularly feminine men). The result is that society places great pressure on individuals to conform to an acceptable range of human behaviours, where deviance from such norms is often punished and corrected.

For example, the categories of “mad”, “delinquent” and “pervert” emerged within specific scientific discourses that worked to construct the “healthy” and “normal” individual, wherein the mad, perverted or delinquent were identified as a threat to society. Such processes represent examples of social power insofar as they determine what particular human behaviours, desires and beliefs coalesce into established, acceptable identities. To quote Foucault (1980: 98): ‘it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals’. That many people take such constellations of identity as natural and expressive of some real self or rational social order helps to conceal both the contingent nature of identity and the functioning of social power.

Recognition is enmeshed with these workings of power in at least three ways. First, our pervasive desire and struggles for recognition can be seen to mirror the techniques of power established in the confessional, in which individuals seek legitimation from authority through acts of self-disclosure (Foucault, 1978). The strength of our desire for recognition is thus indicative of the extent to which we have internalised a set of discourses and practices centred on the production of the individualised self as an object of investigation and control. This desire for legitimating recognition may make us more pliable to processes of social manipulation.<sup>5</sup> Second, the relentless and inescapable social pressures to be recognisable – that is, to present oneself in terms of socially-established and acceptable forms of identity – exert a heavily normalising pressure on us. For example, from the moment of one’s birth (indeed, often even before then), we are recognised as gendered beings and this act of recognition initiates a hugely complex process of identity-formation that shapes our beliefs, desires, behaviour and appearance. Thus, to be recognisable is to be imbricated in a matrix of social practices and normative expectations that shape the very core of our self. Finally, the set of recognisable identities that are socially available are the result of historical power struggles and congealed practices and beliefs, which define the kinds of beings that we are able to be. For example, the fact that we are recognised as either heterosexual or homosexual is, at least in part, a result of particular scientific and psychological discourses, combined with culturally-specific practices, values and aesthetic preferences, gaining a hegemonic status within contemporary culture.<sup>6</sup>

Although Foucault’s work on the links between subjectivity, identity and power remain, I would argue, highly relevant and valuable, he does not couch his analyses of power and self-formation in terms of recognition. One theorist, drawing heavily from Foucault’s work, who



does do this is Judith Butler. Butler is arguably the most influential feminist thinker of her generation. Certainly her theory of gender performativity has inspired countless theorists, especially those working within queer and gender theory. Although it has received significantly less attention than that of performativity, the concept of recognition has been a pervasive one throughout her entire oeuvre, beginning with her first book *Subjects of Desire* (1987), which explores the influence of Hegel on French philosophy. Butler develops the idea of recognition in a notably different way to Taylor and Honneth, and her account thus provides a useful critique of their respective models. In order to grasp the significance of Butler's discussion of recognition, it is necessary to review briefly her theory of gender performativity and the relationship between power and subject-formation.

Butler (1990) has forcefully argued against the idea that gender represents some "substance" or "essence" that acts as the causal origin of masculine or feminine behaviours, beliefs, desires and such like. In an early essay she asserts that gender is 'in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler, 1988: 519). That is to say, gender should not be taken as some stable "thing" that we "have", but rather as the result of a disparate set of discrete acts that we are compelled to repeat until they become sufficiently internalised to be unconsciously reproduced. Over time we come to assume that many of our desires, behaviours, etc. are caused by our being gendered, whereas Butler maintains that precisely the opposite is the case. Consequently, gender is no more than 'a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief' (ibid: 520).

The important point for present purposes is that the acts that generate our idea of "having" a gender are governed by institutionalised norms, which enforce certain modes of behaviour, thought, speech, and even shape our bodies. We are compelled to act in ways that accord with the gender that we are assigned (i.e. recognised as) from birth, whether this be in terms of our mannerisms, appearance, beliefs or sexual desires. Mundane, but nevertheless instructive, examples include the toys we are permitted to play with and the games that we are allowed to play. To repeat the point, we do not play with dolls because we are girls; rather, we are girls because we play with dolls. As a result, we must stop thinking of gender as something "within" us (an essence; an innate property; our inner "womaness") and instead understand gender as the collective norms and values that regulate the type of person that we are able to be. In

Butler's words, 'gender is not exactly what one "is" nor is it precisely what one "has". Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place' (Butler, 2004: 42).

If, as both Foucault and Butler make clear, our identities are bound up with practices of social regulation – that is, we are coerced into particular ways of thinking, acting, feeling, etc. in virtue of our perceived identities – then to be both recognisable and recognised as a particular identity is to be enmeshed in a matrix of social control that governs the types of people that we can be. Recognisable identities are tightly-scripted phenomena that enforce particular patterns of thought and behaviour. On this account, power is co-extensive with subject formation and, therefore, recognition (for, as Foucault and Butler argue, admittedly controversially, there is no becoming a socially recognisable subject outside of relations of power). This means that acts of recognition will themselves be part of the mechanisms of power through which the subject, as a recognisable entity, is produced and sustained (Butler, 1997).

This, I would like to stress, is not in itself a bad thing, but it does suggest the need to be vigilant of the ways in which dimensions of our social identities (race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.) can become reified, especially when couched in the language of "authenticity", "truth" or "nature". Demanding conformity with such identities can undermine individuality and our creative capacity as self-shaping beings by insisting that *this* is the way that one should be (recognised as) African American or homosexual. As Appiah (2005: 110) notes, 'in the realm of identity there is no bright line between recognition and imposition'. This is especially the case when we think that there are specific, natural and normative ways of being, say, a woman or a lesbian. Thus, recognition can become particularly problematic if we assume that what we are recognising are "true" or "real" selves and authentic identities (McQueen, 2015a). For all the evident importance of recognition, which Honneth and Taylor both highlight successfully, it remains a dangerous and complex social phenomenon that must, at the very least, be handled with care.

#### **(IV) Honneth and Power**

If we accept that the above perspective on recognition and power has some merit, then what does this mean for Honneth's theory? To begin, it is instructive to compare Honneth's recent

work on social freedom with Foucault's analysis of modern subjectivity. As noted, Honneth constructs a narrative of societal development based upon the progressive expansion of freedom, which is understood primarily as in terms of increased opportunities for mutual recognition available to members of that society. From a Foucauldian perspective, the (recent) history of society is one of ever more intensive and effective disciplinary practices that increasingly shape the subjectivities of social subjects. Where Honneth offers an optimistic – perhaps an overly optimistic – tale of increased freedom, Foucault warns of ever more effective forms of social control. If Foucault exaggerates his claims about the reach, strength and ubiquity of disciplinary power, then it seems equally likely that Honneth overlooks the ways in which power is inescapably tied up with the very institutions – the family, friendship, law, the economy – that he sees as securing the increases in personal autonomy and social freedom (Connolly, 2010; McNay, 2015; cf. van den Brink and Owen, 2007).

Taking up this line of thought, McNay (2008; 2014) argues that Honneth's account rests on a problematic ontology that treats power as extrinsic to recognition and identity-formation. Because Honneth posits our desire for recognition, and certain forms of intersubjective engagement with others, as independent of power, he is unable to account for the ways in which power functions at the level of identity. Furthermore, it leads him to understand problematic forms of recognition as distortions of, and thus deviations from, healthy norms of mutual, authentic recognition. In assuming an ontology of mutual recognition that has been cleansed of its problematic effects, Honneth is 'unable to acknowledge sufficiently how recognition can itself be distorted and normalizing' (McNay, 2014: 58). The production of a universalised model of authentic recognition relations means that 'social specificity is undercut by a teleology where power is only ever a *post-hoc* distortion of a primary empathic link. Social relations are judged according to how far they stray from this primary empathy: that is, whether they are reified or genuine forms of recognition' (ibid: 56). The result is that 'the normative monism of recognition does not really capture the multidimensional, complex nature of social relations of power' (ibid: 57). Along similar lines Petherbridge (2013: 6) argues that,

The problem with [Honneth's] theory of intersubjectivity is that forms of sociality and subject-formation are conceptualized only within the normative terms of recognition, rather than constituted by various modalities of interaction, including power and strategic action. Honneth therefore reduces power and domination

merely to pathologies of recognition, and by so doing, confines the critique of power to the terms of unsuccessful recognition.

In light of the above critique, two options are open to Honneth: either he can incorporate these concerns about the dynamics of social power and group identities into his theory, or he can show how his tripartite analysis of recognition is able to overcome issues of power, conflict and normalisation that appear to be inextricably imbued into acts of recognition. Regarding the first option, Petherbridge (2013) has suggested that in his earlier work (e.g. Honneth, 1991) he showed the kind of regard for issues of social power and conflict that becomes a noticeable absence in his mature theory of recognition. For example, Honneth challenges Habermas's model of communication for relying too heavily on agreement and understanding, arguing instead that we must conceive of communicative action as conflictual. This leads to an understanding of the social world, including recognition relations, constituted by struggle (Petherbridge, 2013: 30). However, in his move to outlining a formal theory of recognition, Honneth's focus on social power and conflict seems to be surpassed by an assumption of harmonious relations of mutual recognition untainted by issues of power. For example, contra the Foucauldian perspective, Honneth maintains that it is wrong 'to conceptualise societies as relations of domination' (Honneth, 1991: 303).

The problem, however, is that introducing a more nuanced and complex account of power into his theory would seem to require Honneth to revise his account of social development as an increase in social freedom grounded in greater opportunities for mutual recognition. At the very least, he would have to provide reasons why we should see changes in the family or the market as an expansion of freedom and the opportunity for greater self-realisation, rather than the intensification of power relations that govern identity formation in more subtle yet effective ways. Appealing to the possibility of undistorted recognition relations, grounded in our pre-cognitive empathic care for others, simply blunts the critical edges of Honneth's theory and leads him to misconstrue the nature and extent of many social struggles (McNay, 2014). It treats power as extrinsic to recognition and identity-formation, which forecloses an analysis of the normalising, exclusionary dynamics built into collective identities. It is unclear how establishing more authentic forms of love or esteem recognition can counteract either the tendencies toward intercultural conflict that seem partly constitutive of identity categories or the coercive effects of tightly-scripted gender identities.

### **(V) Transsexual Struggles For and Against Recognition**

It is important to stress that Honneth is far from blind to issues of social power. Indeed, much of his work is directed toward rectifying forms of misrecognition that underpin instances of bodily violence, humiliation, disrespect and social exclusion. However, as noted, he seems to treat misrecognition as a deviation from healthy forms of interpersonal interaction, thus assuming that social problems can be rectified by instantiating better and/or more patterns of affirmative recognition. Not only does this seem to assume forms of social interaction (i.e. mutual recognition) untainted by power, but it also only addresses recognition as it occurs between individuals. This overlooks how recognition functions as a key mechanism by which discursive and institutional practices determine what counts as a recognisable identity and thus the kinds of people that we can viably become.

To illustrate this claim, it is instructive to consider the struggles with and against recognition experienced by transsexual individuals, especially in their relationship to what are recognised as ‘normal’, intelligible and coherent gender identities. In particular, the fact that our current gender system is structured along a binary logic wherein one is either unambiguously male or female (and masculine must supervene onto male / feminine onto female) makes it hard to recognise individuals whose identity challenges this basic assumption. Indeed, it may be the case that the processes through which dominant gender identities are secured involves certain other gender identities being posited within a realm of the sick, deviant, monstrous or unintelligible – a realm that functions to strengthen and entrench these dominant gender identities (Connolly, 2002). For example, the commitment to a dualistic framework of gender not only defines intersex individuals as deviant, but the fact that they are often “corrected” in infancy through surgical intervention by doctors (that is, through being recognised as their a “true” or “real” sex) reveals that “intersex” is precluded from being a viable subject position and this foreclosure serves to reinforce the normative weight of a binary gender system (Karkazis, 2008). Thus, medical recognition of what an acceptable gender identity, with regard to both transsexual and intersex identity, becomes enmeshed in a wider scheme of recognition that determines who and what counts as viable expression of human identity. As Butler (2004: 2) observes, recognition is ‘bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not’.

The institutional recognition of gender is emblematic of these dynamics of power and normalisation, often working to regulate the possible forms that gender identity may take. Epstein and Straub (1991: 3) argue that ‘physiology, anatomy, and body codes (clothing, cosmetics, behaviours, miens, affective and sexual object choices) are taken over by institutions that use bodily difference to define and to coerce gender identity’. Similarly, Cromwell (1999: 125) notes how gender identities ‘framed within a medicalized border effectively negated individual identity and erased those whose histories, identities, and sexualities did not fit within the criterial boundaries of a “true transsexual”’. The medical and legal diagnosis and treatment of transsexuality is thus an example of the ways that identity is normalised and regulated through recognition (Davy, 2011). In having to prove to medical practitioners that they are “authentic” transsexuals, individuals can find themselves heavily pressured to conform to particular notions of masculinity or femininity. An inability to embody these gender norms properly can lead to treatment being withheld, which in turn can make it much harder for such individuals to negotiate gendered social spaces and social interactions. The failure to meet the demands of a recognisable (i.e. viable, socially acceptable, medically defined) gender identity can render transsexual individuals even more vulnerable to verbal abuse, physical violence and social ostracism.

These various dynamics of recognition can be identified in debates about the official recognition of transsexuality. In the past few years a number of governments have introduced recognition acts that provide legal recognition to trans individuals who want to transition from female to male or vice-versa.<sup>7</sup> Individuals who wish to be recognised as their desired sex/gender must meet the following criteria: (i) be diagnosed with “gender dysphoria”; (ii) live as their desired sex/gender for at least two years; (iii) intend to live as their desired gender until death (UK Gender Recognition Act, 2004). One notable feature of the UK’s Gender Recognition Act (GRA) is that it does not require individuals to actually undergo surgery in order to be recognised as their desired sex/gender, which represented a significant change from a number of pre-existing GRAs. Instead, the key condition is that one is diagnosed with gender dysphoria: the distressful experience that one’s emotional and psychological identity is incongruent with one’s assigned, biological sex. Its diagnosis is guided by the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM), which is produced by the American Psychiatric Association. Thus, in order to be receive legal recognition of their desired sex/gender, trans individuals applying

to the UK GRA must satisfy health professionals that they represent genuine cases of gender dysphoria.

The introduction of the GRA was in large part the result of the efforts of gender activists, especially Press for Change. It was seen by many as a positive step forward insofar as it granted the opportunity for recognition to individuals who wished to transition. This can have important practical implications, particularly with regard to legal issues such as marriage. The absence of the requirement that one undergo surgery in order to be recognised as one's desired sex/gender is beneficial to individuals who want to transition but are unable, such as those suffering from medical conditions (REF). In addition to practical benefits, the UK's GRA was heralded for its symbolic significance. It can help to validate the legitimacy of trans desires and identities. As one participant in Hines's study (2013: 22-3) observed:

Transsexuals have gone from being socially unacceptable to being sanctioned by government. And that makes a big difference for many people. Whereas they thought that I was some sort of crazy, now Parliament is saying I'm perfectly all right, and there are many other people like me, and that's a good thing.

Clearly, the UK's GRA can be read as an important form of political recognition that has improved the quality of life for a number of individuals who struggle to identify with the sex/gender that they were assigned at birth. To quote Hines (ibid: 66), 'Research findings indicate that the GRA has had positive impacts for many participants in terms of the practical benefits it has brought... For some participants, the GRA also brought increased esteem through the legitimisation of their identity'. Despite this, the GRA has been subject to a good deal of debate (e.g. Cowan, 2005; Davy, 2011; Hines, 2013; Sandland, 2005). A variety of concerns have been expressed, most notably the fact that the GRA rests upon and reinforces a binary notion of sex/gender. In offering individuals the opportunity to change their opportunity to change their legal gender to either male or female the GRA works to exclude certain trans individuals who do easily and unambiguously identify as either male or female, including intersex, bi-gendered, poly-gendered and androgynous trans individuals. Similarly, The requirement that one intends to spend the rest of one's life as their chosen sex/gender works against individuals who experience fluidity in their identity over time, so that they alternate between more masculine and more feminine identities.

The abiding concern, then, is that the official recognition of gender identity as encapsulated in the UK's GRA functions to enforce a particular set of identities as intelligible by determining what counts as a recognisable identity. To quote Davy (2011: 43), 'Recognition confers a notion of authenticity upon certain embodied practices, which then, by default forecloses others'. Thus, the UK GRA can be seen as exerting a normalising pressure through reinforcing certain assumptions about sex/gender identity, including the belief in a binary gender system in which one is / wants to be unambiguously male or female for the duration of one's life. Those individuals who deviate from such norms are thus denied the opportunity for recognition. This concern is intensified by the medicalisation of gender identity that underlines the GRA. The fact that one must be diagnosed with gender dysphoria is a major issue for critics of the GRA. One reason for this is that being diagnosed with gender dysphoria by medical professionals can reinforce the idea, which historically was central to the understanding of transsexuality (see Meyerowitz, 2002), that trans identities are deviations from healthy norms that need to be "corrected". To quote Butler (2004: 77), this perspective 'assumes that certain gender norms have not been properly embodied, and that an error and a failure have taken place... It assumes the language of correction, adaptation, and normalization'. In other words, trans individuals have been and continue to be pathologised by the medical community as unfortunate abnormalities that can be "fixed" through medical intervention.

These issues have caused a good deal of unease amongst trans individuals considering whether or not to apply to the GRA (Davy, 2011; Hines, 2013). Rather than highlighting that recognition is a bad thing, or that it would be preferable to eschew recognition altogether, it shows instead the care that must be taken in offering recognition to others and a need for vigilance in examining the terms on which such recognition is given. This calls for an ambivalent, cautious attitude toward recognition, one that acknowledges its value whilst simultaneously attends to its problems.

## **(VI) The Future of Recognition Theory**

What does or should the future of recognition theory look like, especially if we think that Honneth and Butler each offer valuable insights into the mechanics of recognition? One thing to note is that we should not, as some theorists have suggested, seek to move "beyond" or to "reject" recognition (e.g. Grosz, 2005; Noble, 2006; Oliver, 2001). Such a move is often



motivated by an understandable concern about the intertwining of identity and power: because identities are conduits for power, and recognition is typically targeted at socially established identities, then both identity and recognition must be challenged in favour of a post-identity politics that revels in the unrecognisable. Given the dangers that seem to be inextricably bound up with both identity and recognition, it is clear why this move would be an attractive one for theorists concerned with the effects of social power. However, to reject recognition and advocate a post-identity politics would be to throw the baby out with the bath water; it would jettison the very important contributions that the concept of recognition can make to theories about the self, freedom and justice.

In particular, as Honneth and Taylor aptly demonstrate, the concept of recognition is vital to making sense of ourselves as autonomous, self-valuing agents. Without other people recognising us as self-determining beings worthy of respect and esteem, it is hard to see how we could come to view ourselves in this way. Indeed, given the fact that we are not fully self-transparent beings – that is, that we cannot understand who we are just by reflecting on the contents of our mind – then being recognised by others is an essential component of making sense of oneself. It is precisely this insight that allows recognition theory to move away from problematic atomistic conceptions of the individual and toward a more properly intersubjective, social account of the self. Recognition theory rightly identifies the pivotal importance of our social relations in our self-development and places this at the centre of a theory of justice.

However, the above discussions of identity and power suggest that being recognised also has subjugating dimensions that, it seems, cannot be resolved or eradicated through instantiating “proper” or “authentic” forms of interpersonal recognition relations. One implication of Butler’s account is that one may well find that one does not want to be recognised, if all available forms of recognition work to undo one’s sense of self or force one into an identity that one cannot live with. ‘There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible,’ Butler (2004: 3) writes, ‘if intelligible is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing norms’. Accordingly, it might be necessary to risk becoming in some sense unrecognisable – at least for a temporary period – if we ourselves are unable to identify with any available form of recognition. Furthermore, this desire not to be recognised can itself be taken as a political strategy aimed at challenging entrenched norms of identity – not just with the aim of producing alternative forms of recognition but, more

fundamentally, to call into question the very notion of a recognisable identity and hence to highlight and explore the limits and limitations of recognition itself.

Rather than reject recognition, Butler highlights (i) the ways in which recognition is connected with regulatory practices and discourses; and (ii) the problems that arise when one finds oneself unable to identify and embody gendered norms. As the previous section made clear, individuals who deviate from established norms of sex and gender may find no proper patterns and practices of recognition available to them through which they can adequately make sense of themselves. Furthermore, viewed from the perspective of existing regimes of recognition, it is not clear what an appropriate form of recognition might look like. Recognition will then be experienced as a coercive imposition that undermines their own attempts at self-understanding. In such a situation, Butler (2004a, p. 4) observes, 'I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the norms by which I am recognized make life unlivable'. This is not to deny the importance of recognition, but instead to highlight those occasions when we find recognition to be as much part of the problem as part of the solution.

In light of the above, it would be a mistake to assume that all social problems can be solved via improving current patterns of misrecognition or non-recognition. It is this belief that marks out a potential problem with the theories of recognition offered by Honneth and Taylor. As McBride (2013) has suggested, these thinkers offer a "deficit model" of recognition, which depicts 'a relationship between someone who lacks recognition, claiming it from another who has the power to remedy this recognition deficit by granting the recognition which is sought' (ibid: 6). A central feature of the deficit model is that it approaches issues of injustice or oppression as stemming from a lack, absence or distorted form of recognition. Consequently, the solution to such issues lies in either (a) expanding or adjusting current patterns of recognition; or (b) instantiating forms of recognition where they were previously withheld. Social problems are not seen to stem from the mechanics of recognition itself, but rather consist in problematic forms of recognition. As Zurn (2011: 63) notes, the result of this approach is that the appropriate response to misrecognition is tacitly assumed to be 'adequate or appropriate affirmative recognition'.

What might an alternative to this deficit model of recognition look like? At a theoretical level, it suggests the need for a more complex, ambivalent account of recognition which fully acknowledges the ways in which power intertwines with identity and subject-formation. It

might also require Honneth to revise some of his claims regarding the possibility of intersubjective recognition relations unshaped by power, as well as his suggestion that modern society can be understood as a progressive expansion of freedom and mutual recognition. At the very least, it requires acknowledging certain negative power dynamics built into those institutions, such as the family, that Honneth sees as securing our freedom through providing appropriate recognition (McNay, 2015).

At a practical level, it could be expedient to explore ways of reducing the salience of recognition in social life. This would push against the deficit model's tendency to focus exclusively on securing more or better forms of recognition. Such a strategy might not be effective for addressing every form of recognition, but it may well be suitable to responding to the problems of gender recognition. Given the normalising and exclusionary pressures that attach to gender recognition, as outlined above, we might proceed best by making gender recognition a less prevalent element of socio-institutional life: that is, we might make gender recognition – and, hence, our gender as a feature of our identity – matter a little less. In particular, we can focus on analysing and reducing the ways in which gender recognition is embedded in institutions and social practices. This can include debates about the gender divisions in schools and the workplace, as well as an examination and revision of the ways that contemporary family life is shaped by gender recognition.<sup>8</sup> Much more needs to be said about such a strategy, but the above account of the problems that imbue acts of recognition suggests the need to consider it.

## **Conclusion**

The rise of recognition theory over the past twenty years or so has been a rapid and influential one; the concept of recognition is now central to contemporary discussions about identity, freedom and justice. Both Taylor and Honneth reveal the promise of recognition for analysing and justifying social struggles, as well as identifying key conditions for the successful development of a positive identity and self-relation. They seem right to argue that we require appropriate forms of recognition if we are to live autonomous, flourishing lives. However, we must also be attendant to the problems that attach to recognition, in particular its relationship with power, exclusion and domination. If, as a number of theorists have argued, power is co-extensive with recognition and identity-formation, then we must tread carefully when offering

recognition as a solution to social problems. If nothing else, this reveals the complex, multifaceted nature of recognition. Despite its importance, recognition theory is still very much in its infancy. There are a number of issues to resolve and questions to be answered concerning both the promise and problem of recognition. Much work remains to be done. However, it seems reasonable to assume that such work will ultimately be worthwhile. Recognition is, and no doubt will continue to be, a valuable conceptual resource for critical theorists concerned with justice, freedom and the perennial question of how to make society a better place for us all.

### **Acknowledgements**

Paddy McQueen is funded by an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellowship.

### **Bibliography**

- Appiah, K. A. 2005. *The Ethics of Identity*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Butler, J. 1987. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Colombia University Press
- Butler, J. 1988. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4): 519-31
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge
- Butler, J. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge
- Connolly, J. 2010. 'Love in the Private: Axel Honneth, Feminism and the Politics of Recognition'. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 9: 414-433
- Connolly, W. 2002. *Identity / Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press
- Cowan, S. 2005. "'Gender is no Substitute for Sex": A Comparative Human Rights Analysis of the Legal Regulation of Sexual Identity'. *Feminist Legal Studies*, 13(1): 67-96

- Cromwell, J. 1999. *Transmen & FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders & Sexualities*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press
- Davy, Z. 2011. *Recognizing Transsexuals: Personal, Political and Medicolegal Embodiment*. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Epstein, J. and Straub, K. (eds.). 1991. *Body Guards: Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*. London: Routledge
- Fichte, J. G. 2000 [1795-96]. *Foundations in Natural Right: According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Foucault, M. 1978 [1976]. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. Hurley, R. (trans.). New York: Pantheon Books
- Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interview and Other Writings*. Gordon, C. (trans. and ed.). Brighton: Harvester
- Foucault, M. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Sheridan, A. (trans.). New York: Vintage Books
- Grosz, E. 2005. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1977 [1807]. *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Miller, A. V. (trans.). Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1991 [1820]. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Nisbet, H. B. (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Heyes, C. 2007. *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hines, S. 2013. *Gender Diversity, Recognition and Citizenship: Towards a Politics of Difference*. Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Honneth, A. 1991. *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*. Baynes, K. (trans.). Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press
- Honneth, A. 1995. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Anderson, J. (trans.). Cambridge: Polity
- Honneth, A. 2003. Contributions to *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. Fraser, N. and Honneth, A. London: Verso
- Honneth, A. 2004. 'Recognition and Justice: Outline of a Plural Theory of Justice'. *Acta Sociologica*. 47(4): 351-364
- Honneth, A. 2007. *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity
- Honneth, A. 2012. *The I in the We*. Cambridge: Polity

- Honneth, A. 2014. *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*. New York: Colombia University Press
- Karkazis, K. 2008. *Fixing Sex*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Kojève, A. 1980 [1947]. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Nichols, J. H. (trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Lorber, J. 2005. *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change*. London: W. W. Norton and Company
- McBride, C. 2013. *Recognition*. Cambridge: Polity
- McNay, L. 2008. *Against Recognition*. Cambridge: Polity
- McNay, L. 2014. *The Misguided Search for the Political*. Cambridge: Polity
- McNay, L. 2015. 'Social Freedom and Progress in the Family: Reflections on Care, Gender and Inequality'. *Critical Horizons*, 16(2): 170-86
- McQueen, P. 2015a. *Subjectivity, Gender and the Struggle for Recognition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave
- McQueen, P. 2015b. 'Honneth, Butler and the Ambivalent Effects of Recognition'. *Res Publica*, 21(1): 43-60
- Mead, G. H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Meyerowitz, J. 2002. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press
- Noble, J. B. 2006. *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape*. Toronto: Women's Press
- Oliver, K. 2001, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Petherbridge, D. 2013. *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth*. New York: Lexington Books
- Pinkard, T. 1996, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge: CUP
- Pippin, R. B. 2008. *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Sandland, R. 2005. 'Feminism and the Gender Recognition Act 2004'. *Feminist Legal Studies*, 13(1): 43-66
- Taylor, C. 1994. 'The Politics of Recognition' in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Gutmann, A. (ed.). New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Van den Brink, B. and Owen, D. (eds.). 2007. *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Social Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press

Williams, R. B. 1992. *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other*. Albany: State University of New York Press

Williams, R. B. 1997. *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*. Los Angeles: University of California Press

Zurn, C. 2011. 'Misrecognition, Marriage, and Derecognition', in *Recognition Theory as Social Research: Investigating the Dynamics of Social Conflict*. O'Neill, S. and Smith, N. H. (eds.). Basingstoke: Palgrave

---

<sup>1</sup> This is one particular interpretation of the master-slave dialectic, which draws from the work of Pinkard (1996) and Pippin (2008) amongst others. For an historically influential, Marxist reading of the dialectic, see Kojève (1980). Williams (1992; 1997) provides a detailed discussion of the concept of recognition in Hegel's and Fichte's respective philosophies.

<sup>2</sup> One major reason for this is that we are not fully self-transparent entities: we are never fully aware of the contents of our minds or the types of people that we are. This is why other people are sometimes better placed to make sense of what we are thinking and why we are acting. Our self-awareness must be filtered through the interpretations of others, which places us as to some degree dependent upon their recognition of us in order to make sense of ourselves.

<sup>3</sup> Honneth's work is far-ranging and complex. It incorporates a number of different theoretical perspectives from an array of academic disciplines. This includes first- and second-wave critical theory, functionalist sociology, symbolic interactionism and object-relations theory. It is impossible to cover all aspects of Honneth's approach here and so only key elements relevant to the present discussion are selected. For an excellent introduction to Honneth's work, see Zurn (2015). Petherbridge (2013) provides an insightful critique of how his theory of recognition has developed and the various theoretical influences that it incorporates.

<sup>4</sup> An idea that has driven critical theory since its inception, as Honneth (1991) makes clear.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Heyes (2007) has used a Foucauldian framework to document persuasively how social practices such as dieting and plastic surgery invoke ideas of true, inner selves to regulate and normalise behaviour.

<sup>6</sup> On the historical construction of heterosexuality, see Katz (2007)

<sup>7</sup> A comprehensive list of countries' gender recognition systems is provided by the UK justice system: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/tribunals/gender-recognition-panel/list-of-approved-countries-or-territories/table-approved-countries.pdf> (accessed 31/08/2015).

<sup>8</sup> It is along such lines that Lorber (2005) has called for a feminist degendering movement.